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Degas

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DEGAS

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ON THE COVER: *The Dancing Class* (about 1876)
Collection Harry Payne Bingham, New York, $32\frac{5}{8}'' \times 29\frac{7}{8}''$
(*see commentary, plate 1*)

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STUDY FOR PORTRAIT OF DURANTY (charcoal and white chalk, 1879) *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*

EDGAR-HILAIRE-GERMAIN

DEGAS

(1834–1917)

TEXT BY DANIEL CATTON RICH

THOUGH KNOWN as the painter of ballet subjects, Edgar-Hilaire-Germain Degas was far more than that. He was a portrait painter of great subtlety and distinction, a draftsman of infinite resource, and one of the most exciting sculptors of his century. He was born in Paris in 1834 of wealthy upper-class parents, and it was supposed that he would follow his father's career as a banker. Edgar, however, had other ideas. On his school books he traced dream heads and figures of knights in armour. He had a recurrent dream of his own: to be an artist.

Finally convincing his father that he was right, Degas enrolled in the studio of Louis Lamothe, a former pupil of the Neo-Classical painter, Ingrès. At that time, Paris was drawn up in two hostile camps, the Romanticists under Delacroix, who insisted on emotional colour and exotic subjects, and the Neo-Classicists under Ingrès, who recommended a study of Greek and Roman art and practised a hard, realistic approach to themes drawn from history and mythology. Degas was wise enough to correct Lamothe's dull teaching with frequent visits to the Louvre, where he copied the Italian masters; and he was soon to travel many times to Italy where he opened his eyes wide to the primitives and artists of the fifteenth century like Botticelli and Leonardo.

Though he first tried to paint historical subjects in the approved manner, giving them what he called a touch of "modern feeling" by choosing more realistic models and arranging them in less formal poses, he soon gave up this

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idea and began to concentrate on portraits. Degas was a superb portrait painter; in his early canvases he immediately showed his skill in capturing the inner life of his sitters. A born psychologist, he enjoyed the play of one personality upon another. We see also his dependence on the clear structure and incisive drawing of earlier masters, combined with a feeling for discreet colour and delicate effects of light. For all his portraits Degas made many drawings from life, then re-created his sitters from sketches and memory. As he progressed, his touch became lighter and he grew more able to catch the fleeting pose and transient expression. He never accepted a commission and never finished a portrait when he grew bored. When a beautiful woman wanted to pose for him he told her bluntly: "Yes, I'd like to do a portrait of you but I'd make you put on a cap and apron like some little maidservant."

After the war of 1870, in which Degas served, he returned to find that the old society which he had loved was breaking apart. He looked around for new subjects and discovered them in the opera-house and ballet. Here was the fluid movement, the flash of colour and arresting play of light that he loved. At the same time, Degas became friendly with a group of young painters, among them Manet, Renoir, Bazille, Monet, and Pissarro. He took part in their discussions centring round painting modern life rather than literary subjects and stressing more and more daring effects of colour. Degas disagreed, however, with these men who were to join with him in founding the group of Impressionists, when they insisted on painting out of doors. There was more to art than surrendering oneself to Nature, he said; one built a work of art *mentally*; through patient observation and style one carried it out. When he first visited the ballet, he recorded it in precise detail; soon he was changing and heightening his effects and substituting pastel for oil. Pastel allowed him to draw as he painted, and satisfied his desire for brilliant, more vaporose colour.

At the same time, Degas sought new and surprising angles of composition. He tilted the floor of a rehearsal room; he peered down from opera boxes; he stood in the wings and glimpsed fresh, unforeseen slices of life. Part of this originality came from his study of Japanese art which was then the rage of Paris. From Japanese prints Degas learned to cut his figures abruptly, to overlap one by another—such devices being used to increase the apparent spontaneity of his vision, which actually was calculated down to the last millimetre. From photography, which he ardently practised, Degas further discovered the close-up, the blurred background, and the sudden sharp detail, all of which he used for artistic purposes. And in his studies of dancers he re-created not only glamorous moments on the stage but also the hours of strain and ennui of the young girls exercising or waiting in the wings.

Degas applied his inventions not only to the ballet but to the race-course as well. He had been the first to explore the action of race-horses at the fashionable tracks near Paris where gentleman riders, brilliant in their silk coats, rode elegant, high-bred animals. He prowled round the city and came back from out-of-doors cafés with trenchant records of singers and dancers. He even studied, with pitiless insight, the dregs of Parisian life, in *Absinthe* (plate 7). Again it would be laundresses, working away at their monotonous tasks (plate 11); or a series of women at the fashionable milliners (plate 13). In all these Degas sought out the emphatic, telling line; his drawing became broader, more fluent, while his colour grew richer and more original as he

A DANCER AT THE AGE OF FOURTEEN (bronze, 1880)
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left behind the conventional harmonies of the Old Masters. Until about 1886, Degas concentrated on one problem: how to combine the instantaneous vision of Impressionism with the undying principles of classical design. In many works his success was complete but Degas was always a perfectionist, and in his last period he shut himself away from the world and tried to transform his style. He wanted to become a powerfully expressive painter, rather than the masterful draftsman. He took up sculpture in earnest and turned out several hundred strong, even rugged, statuettes of dancers, horses, and bathing women, all of them infused with a new violence of movement and rhythm. He studied the nude bodies of women in every conceivable attitude, twisting, turning, seen from above, from below, leaping from a tub, standing on one foot, sprawled on a divan. He re-did his ballet subjects, no longer drawing with pastel but plastering it on in one heavy coat over another. His final dancers have lost their piquancy; their faces are slashed with strokes of coruscating colour; they look like strange, fierce birds or tropical butterflies. Much of this late style springs from the near-blindness of his old age. He could no longer see to work in the small; he needed to enlarge everything. On pieces of tracing paper over forty inches high,

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Degas drew vehemently. Gone for ever were the delicate contours; the charcoal seems to dig deeper into the paper and hew out form. Degas was not afraid to distort and to emphasize.

Personally, Degas was a super-sensitive, ingrown, bitter and witty man. He had few friends, and to the end he remained a bachelor. An individual of exquisite taste, he had assembled a great art collection. In 1917 at the age of eighty-three he died, practically blind, and neglected by a new generation. He had instructed Forain that he wanted no funeral oration. "If there has to be one, you, Forain, get up and say, 'He greatly loved drawing. So do I.' And then go home." Forty years later his place is assured as one of the most original artists of a great century.

Commentary

COVER (PLATE ONE)

THE DANCING CLASS (about 1876)

Collection Harry Payne Bingham, New York
Oil on canvas, $32\frac{5}{8}'' \times 29\frac{7}{8}''$

Compared to Degas' earlier treatment of the dancing class in the Opéra in rue Le Peletier, this painting shows how quickly the artist advanced into the world of movement and casual effect which he was to make his own. Larger in size, broader, freer, and lighter in treatment, it is full of many impressions, gathered into a remarkably complex design. Perspective is here cultivated by the slanting floor and by the diagonal line of dancers, starting in the left foreground and continuing back into the farthest corner. The picture space is widened by a mirror catching reflections of other dancers and a window beyond. What intense study has gone into each ballerina! Each is caught in an individual pose and gesture and for the first time the artist has attempted a figure in action. All the bustle and confusion of many movements is caught with an almost camera-like fidelity. Degas cuts off one figure by another, overlapping forms easily and masterfully, but so shrewdly are they fitted together that there is no real confusion. Against all this turning, twisting, and posing stands the rock-like form of Maître Jules Perrot, leaning heavily on his stick. Behind, in further contrast, are mothers watching the class, their street clothes furnishing a foil for the light, graceful costumes of the dancers. Here was something new in art, a surprising view of a little-known world, composed with the grace and authority of an Old Master.

PLATE TWO

THE BELLELLI FAMILY (about 1860–1862)

The Louvre, Paris. Oil on canvas, $78\frac{3}{4}'' \times 99\frac{5}{8}''$

On a trip to Naples in 1856 Degas visited his aunt, the Baroness Bellelli, and began a series of little portraits and drawings of her family; he wove these, and many more preliminary drawings, and sketches in oil and pastel, into this life-size group portrait of his uncle and aunt and their two daughters in their own drawing-room.

Today, there is nothing original in such a conception, but in the fifties in France the plan of showing a family in its own environment was audacious and unusual. In one of his notebooks Degas mentions doing "portraits of people in familiar and typical attitudes, above all giving to their faces the same choice of expression as one gives to their bodies." With this in mind he sought to characterize each of the four individuals and at the same time compose a picture which would satisfy the exacting requirements of the Florentine masters whose works he saw daily in the art galleries.

The dignified standing figure of the Baroness, the contrasting poses of the little girls, the brusquely indicated profile of the Baron, turning in his chair; Degas studied each until he found the revealing attitude. Then he arranged the four in a moment of pause between actions, managing to suggest, with great restraint, a certain dramatic interplay of personalities.

The design of the picture is based on a series of rectangles, against which play the curves of the figures. In this severe structure of right angles (echoed most obviously in the framed drawing on the wall of Auguste De Gas, his father and brother of the Baroness) one sees Degas' pronounced love for the masters of the early Renaissance and for Holbein, whose drawings he assiduously studied. Relieving the monotony are the charmingly painted details of the room, the patterned wallpaper and rug, the touches of gold and black, the reflecting mirror—a typical Degas device to secure space and suggest a fourth wall to the interior. The contrast of blacks and whites, the harmony of blues and tans, are a great advance over the low-keyed, earlier portraits. Bringing the composition to life is the gentle, revealing and yet suffusing light which reminds one of Corot.

The Bellelli Family remains the painter's first important and original work. Typically cool and aloof on the surface, it contains the promise of Degas' later audacities in portraiture and shows the precocious mastery of the young painter. Today it is one of the glories of the Louvre.

PLATE THREE

HEAD OF A YOUNG WOMAN (1867)

The Louvre, Paris. Oil on canvas, $10\frac{5}{8}'' \times 8\frac{5}{8}''$

The woman who posed for this exquisite portrait is unknown; she can hardly have been (as was once seriously suggested) the Duchess Morbilli, who was sixty-two years old in 1867.

With the simplest means Degas made a living portrait out of what a lesser painter would have turned into a mere study of a head. The face is not that of a beautiful woman; a few years later the artist was to write from New Orleans: "The women here are almost all pretty and many have even amidst their charms that touch of ugliness without which, no salvation." Always seeking character rather than formal beauty, the painter has not minimized her largish nose or corrected the slant of her left eye. The use of a few restrained tones (note how the black of her gown is repeated in the ribbon which binds her hair) and the most subtle rendering of form and delicate gradations in brushwork create a remarkable work of art.

Such a portrait unites the best of the Italian tradition and the style of earlier French masters like Clouet and Corneille de Lyon. Those who have dismissed Degas as a misogynist should study the tenderness and understanding with which he early painted portraits of women.

PLATE FOUR

DEGAS' FATHER LISTENING TO PAGANS (about 1869–1872)

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
(John T. Spaulding Collection). Oil on canvas, $31\frac{1}{2}'' \times 24\frac{3}{4}''$

There are a number of paintings by Degas in which with exquisite tact he studied people listening to music. Auguste De Gas, the father of the artist, was a great enthusiast of Italian music and himself a successful amateur musician. Lorenzo Pagans, a Spanish singer, was celebrated in Paris, appearing in many concerts where he accompanied

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himself on the guitar. He often took part in musical evenings at the homes of Degas and Manet.

This is the second of three portraits Degas painted on the same theme. The first (today in the Louvre) is more conventional, showing Pagans seated, in full-face, with the father listening in the background. In the version reproduced here Degas gave a more intense expression to the moment, contrasting the erect figure of the singer, pushed to the left, with the bent, ageing old man on the right; the canvas is daringly divided by the vertical of the guitar, and the contrast deepened by silhouetting the profile of Pagans and placing the head of Auguste against an open sheet of music. The execution is freer and more sketchy, Degas' brush supplying short accents which build the form and yet give an impromptu and casual effect to the unusual composition. There is relatively little colour, the tans, browns, greys, and whites contributing to a restrained tonal harmony.

PLATE FIVE

AT THE RACE-COURSE (1869–1872)

The Louvre, Paris. Essence on canvas, $18\frac{1}{8}'' \times 24''$

Degas' pictures of the race-track, unlike those of Manet done at the same period, which stress the blur and rapid movement of the early Impressionist vision, are most often concerned with the riders parading in front of the grandstands in the cool, pale sunlight of Paris.

The artist's love of silhouettes is clearly seen in this one where he has simplified the horses by painting them broadly and flatly against the sun, their shadows cast on the grass in an almost Oriental fashion. His vigorously painted outlines give the composition a decorative character; the repetition of browns, in varying shades, is echoed in the grandstand and contrasted with the reds and blues and dull yellows of the costumes of the riders and spectators.

This is also a scene, Degas makes us remember, from daily life. He shows us the movement of the crowd on the left and gives a counter-movement of the riders on the right, the design being carefully planned through perspective by diminishing the size of the retreating figures in two diagonals to the centre distance, and by the line of the fence. He has not ignored the stacks of the factories and the ornamental detail of the grandstand. The two largest riders, one facing to the left, the other to the right, break the monotony of the composition and give us a sense of being in the very midst of the scene.

Degas' search for fresh pictorial effects led him to continued experiments in technique as well as in other directions. To get a substance which would dry quickly and lend itself to a draftsman's handling, Degas dried the oil from his pigments and mixed them with a volatile spirit, perhaps turpentine, the term "essence" has been used to designate this medium.

PLATE SIX

THE COTTON MARKET, NEW ORLEANS (1873)

Museum of Pau, France. Oil on canvas, $29\frac{1}{8}'' \times 36\frac{1}{4}''$

"I have attached myself to a fairly vigorous picture," Degas wrote in 1873 from New Orleans to his friend, the painter Tissot, "which is destined for Agnew (the English picture dealer) and which he should place in Manchester. For if a spinner ever wished to find his painter, he really ought to hit upon me. The Interior of a Cotton Buyers' Office in New Orleans.

"In it are about fifteen individuals more or less occupied with a table covered with the precious material, and two men, one half-leaning and the other half-sitting on it; the buyer and the broker are discussing a pattern. A raw picture if there ever was one. . . ."

He had gone to America to visit his brothers who were in the cotton business and his desire was to paint a series of recognizable individuals in characteristic action. John Rewald, who made a careful study of the people involved, identifies the elderly gentleman in the foreground who is testing a sample as Michel Musson, the father-in-law of René De Gas. At the extreme right is the cashier, John Livandais, standing over account books. In the centre is René reading the local newspaper, the *Times-Picayune*. On a high stool is James Prestidge who is conversing with a customer making notes in a memorandum book, while William Bell, another son-in-law of Musson, sits on a table covered with cotton, Achille, Degas' other brother, leans negligently against a window in the extreme left, observing the scene.

To unify the picture Degas played a series of irregular white shapes (the cotton, the newspaper, the books, etc.) against the dark clothes of the figures. Shrewdly he composed the architecture of the room with its repeated rectangles back into distance, carefully increasing detail in the foreground, and overlapping one figure by another to give an effect of perspective as the figures diminish in size. The eye level, looking down on the seated figure of Musson, and the slanting floor, contribute to the illusion of space. In so complicated a scheme, colour is minimized and Degas' brilliant drawing, recording a gesture here, a pose there, binds the whole composition together. No Neo-Classical painting was ever more carefully designed, and the final effect is a balance between a sensation of movement and bustle, and a clarity which is super-photographic. In addition the picture remains a faithful and sympathetic document of a vanished period. It was one of the first of Degas' works to enter a museum, being purchased by the city of Pau as early as 1878.

PLATE SEVEN

ABSINTHE (1876)

The Louvre, Paris. Oil on canvas, $36\frac{1}{4}'' \times 26\frac{3}{4}''$

Of all of Degas' scenes of café life, this is the most famous. When it was shown in London in 1893 it created a scandal, the Victorian public being unprepared for so disenchanted a picture of Parisian life. The title, as well, suggested depravity and it was widely attacked by conservative artists like Walter Crane and as stoutly defended by Walter Sickert and George Moore. Degas himself must have been surprised at such English vehemence. He had posed two of his friends, the etcher Marcellin Desboutin and the actress Ellen Andrée, on the terrace of the Nouvelle-Athènes Café in the Place Pigalle, a spot much frequented by the artists of the day.

The design is among the most brilliant inventions of the artist. From Japanese prints he had learned this zigzag arrangement of lines which, beginning in the bottom of the canvas, is carried swiftly back by the blank table tops. The figures are placed to the right of centre and sharply cut by the frame. Degas' familiar use of two contrasting figures is here given compositional, as well as psychological, emphasis, and a dazzling use of several perspectives creates a peculiar tension. It seems that the artist had chosen to represent without comment a typical scene of two unconnected Bohemian characters. *Absinthe* is not, as the outraged Puritans of the day pretended, a study in alcoholism, but an Impressionist "slice of life", here drawn with extraordinary sensitivity and painted with a deft, incisive touch. It is amusing to compare Renoir's glamorous portrait of Ellen Andrée with Degas' pitiless and objective study. We may assume that the actress "dressed up" for this role as she would have done for some scene in the theatre.

PLATE EIGHT

CAFÉ-CONCERT: AT LES AMBASSADEURS (1876–1877)

Museum of Lyons, France

Pastel on monotype on paper, $14\frac{1}{2}'' \times 10\frac{5}{8}''$

In many of his scenes of café life, Degas was struck by unexpected effects of light—the dazzling footlights, the softer illumination cast by gas globes against the evening sky, and the subdued reflections picked up by figures in the audience. It was a time of gay out-of-door entertainment in Paris and as the artist walked up and down the Champs Élysées, dropping in at some café and soaking in impressions, he was already planning such animated and complex pictures as this one. Later he would sketch from memory the figures on the stage, and gradually the idea would take shape until he finally put it down.

Here the picture began with a monotype in which Degas probably

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indicated the composition in a brownish black. Then he began to build up the colour, accent the drawing, stress certain lights, darken other areas until the proper balance was achieved. The effect was to seem impromptu; the main figure, the singer, with her energetic gestures, is glimpsed over a foreground of apparently casual heads and hats, all however most carefully fitted into place and rhythmically tied together. Passing over the orchestra, where the top of a bass viol is silhouetted against the stage, the eye is focused strongly on the figures, brilliantly lit, and framed by the pillars behind them. In this small picture Degas has suggested a whole side of Paris life. It remains more than a typical Impressionist glimpse of an unusual subject; by its capital design and use of light and colour the scene takes on a highly original and fantastic character.

PLATE NINE

DIEGO MARTELLI (1879)

National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh
Oil on canvas, $43\frac{1}{4}'' \times 39\frac{3}{8}''$

Though Degas painted fewer and fewer portraits as he grew older, some of his later work in this genre ranks among his greatest achievements. There is a strength, a warmth in them which seldom emerged in his more restrained earlier canvases. Diego Martelli was a Neapolitan engraver who worked in Paris, and the artist liked to drop into his studio and speak Italian with him. He did this delightful portrait as a testimony of this friendship, conveying the homely ease and clutter in which Martelli worked.

The viewpoint was consciously adopted to stress the rotund body of the sitter. From his pictures of the stage Degas had learned the value of different eye levels to add variety to the usual frontal view. This device allowed Degas as well to flatten out the table top and create an interesting pattern of the scattered papers and objects of the engraver's art—a passage which is contrasted with the simple broad lines of the figure set opposite it. The blue of the table cover is carried into the blue sofa behind and the sweeping curve of the sofa's back carries the eye round to the figure of Martelli. The warm greys, pinks, and russet tones, the occasional flash of yellow and red are carefully balanced. Throughout, the brushwork is broad and sensitive and shows the effect of Degas' interest in pastel: the paint is stroked and lightly applied here and there in a manner which suggests crayon, rather than pigment. Dissatisfied with this format, Degas tried a second portrait of Martelli, fitting the figure into a horizontal, rather than a vertical, canvas. Such variations were typical with Degas who was continually striving to capture the exact placing and mood of his models.

PLATE TEN

THE DANCING CLASS (1880)

Denver Art Museum, Colorado
Pastel on paper, $24\frac{3}{4}'' \times 18\frac{7}{8}''$

Degas did not picture the ballet only in its floating, ecstatic moments. His trenchant eye observed, with a devastating realism, the moments of preparation in the classroom and the actions of the dancers, adjusting their slippers, stretching their muscles, trying out their steps. He revealed the awkwardness, the physical conditioning of the performers, finding a new beauty in such truth.

This is a typical snapshot view of a number of seemingly unrelated actions fitted into a design. The four figures are pushed into the right side of the picture—the two dancers, with their contrasted poses are linked by the overlapping of their ballet skirts and by the two outsiders, perhaps their mothers, who seem engaged in conversation. The artist sought out such contrasts—the young girls with their light, gauzy costumes, against the dark street clothes of the older women, and between the women themselves a further difference of age and perhaps social status, suggested by the bonnet and shawl of the one and the plumed hat of the other.

Movement is conveyed by the standing dancer who seems about to move out of the picture, and by the strong diagonals of the floor and slanting bench and wall which converge in the opposite direction. So just is Degas' feeling for light that the scene is bathed in a clear, revealing atmosphere, the exquisite greys and whites of the ballet costumes brought to life by sudden and unexpected touches of colour here and there.

PLATE ELEVEN

TWO LAUNDRESSES (about 1884)

The Louvre, Paris. Oil on canvas, $29\frac{7}{8}'' \times 32\frac{1}{4}''$

This composition of two laundresses is a rich study of character and counter-movement. Again, a composition with two figures in differing action; the artist has dared to represent one figure stretching and with her mouth open in a yawn, and the other pressing down on her iron in a pose which brings every muscle into play. Subjects like this had been taboo in painting until the Impressionists, and among them Degas was perhaps unique in finding an almost classical form to express so homely a scene from everyday life. In this way he parallels the interest of a writer like Zola who was widening the subject matter of the novel much as Degas was broadening the field of art.

The composition is as remarkable as the sympathetic, even sub-humorous comment which the artist makes on his models. The table which cuts diagonally across the foreground like his tilting stages and flattened floors, bringing us into the picture; the strongly felt contours of the figures themselves with their rhythm of contrasted curves and angles; the unusual palette and sense of light which permeates the entire scene—all these are unified into a design of such strength and power that one thinks almost of some classical relief, strangely and effectively turned into a comment on modern life.

PLATE TWELVE

A BALLET SEEN FROM AN OPERA BOX (1885)

Philadelphia Museum of Art
(John G. Johnson Collection). Pastel on paper, $25\frac{1}{8}'' \times 19\frac{1}{4}''$

To surprise an effect was often Degas' idea. His variety of treatments of the ballet is enormous and none is more original than a series of scenes on the stage, glimpsed from an opera box, where space between spectator and dancer is telescoped and we feel thrust suddenly into the very midst of a performance. The theme of the dancer, caught in a characteristic moment, is also found in one of Degas' best sonnets:

> She dances, dying. As around the reed
> Of a flute where the sad wind of Weber plays,
> The ribbon of her steps, twists and knots,
> Her body sinks and falls in the movement of a bird.
>
> The violins sing. Fresh from the blue of the water
> Silvana comes, and carefully ruffles and preens:
> The happiness of rebirth and love on her cheeks,
> In her eyes, on her breasts, on her whole new being . . .
>
> And her satin feet, like needles embroider
> Patterns of pleasure. The springing girl
> Wears out my poor eyes, straining to follow her.
>
> With a trifle, the beautiful mystery ends.
> She bends back her legs too far in a leap,
> It's the leap of a frog in the Cytherean pond.
>
> (*translated by Bertha Ten Eyck James*)

PLATE THIRTEEN

THE MILLINERY SHOP (about 1885)

The Art Institute of Chicago
(Mr. and Mrs. L. L. Coburn Collection).
Oil on canvas, $38\frac{7}{8}'' \times 42\frac{7}{8}''$

Degas painted no still lifes. The flow and movement of life interested him far more than inanimate objects; he sought, above all, the human

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figure in its infinite variety of gesture and action. Even here, when he concentrates on a table of hats in the shop of a fashionable *modiste*, he plans his picture round a person.

The design is abrupt and surprising in its angular arrangement of the table top and the figure of the *modiste* who holds up a hat in her stockinged hand. The round form of the hats is contrasted with this straight-line arrangement; and in the deft, exquisite touch with which he has treated these frivolous objects, there is a reminder of the way he painted skirts and costumes of his ballet dancers. Their range of delicate colours is further compared with the golden orange of the table top, the blue background of distance, and the neutral green of the woman's dress. Throughout there is a soft pervading glow of colour, a richness of light and texture, a breadth of painting which shows that Degas carried over from pastel to pigment many of the discoveries he had made in his use of crayon on paper. There is a further unstressed variance between the simple garb of the *modiste*, with her piquant profile, and the luxurious and fashionable hats which surround her.

Such paintings grew out of many visits to the houses of fashionable dressmakers in the company of Mme Straus, a devoted friend of the artist. One day, noting his concentration at a fitting, she inquired what could possibly interest him. "The red hands of the little girl who holds the pins", he replied gravely.

PLATE FOURTEEN

THE TUB (1886)

The Hill-Stead Museum, Farmington, Connecticut

Pastel on paper, $27\frac{1}{2}'' \times 27\frac{1}{2}''$

Degas never surrendered a subject until he had tried it from every available point of view. When he returned to his theme of a woman taking a bath in a round tin tub he made something entirely different each time. He had the ability to see freshly over and over again.

These women, whom he studied so assiduously in the intimate confines of their boudoirs, do not exist as individuals. He seldom personified them; their faces are often hidden by the poses he caught them in; usually there is only a line of cheek, an ear, a slight indication of profile. The artist concentrated instead on the supple or tensed bodies and rendered, by his powerful drawing, the play of muscles beneath their light-struck flesh. There is something curiously chaste about his reaction; his nudes are never voluptuous and they lack the healthy animalism of Rubens or the radiant sensuality of Renoir. They are first and foremost studies of the human form and only secondarily women. Remarkable is the seeming awkwardness of the pose, an awkwardness redeemed by the extraordinary composition with its repetition of the curved lines of the tub, the head, and back. The strong action of the bent figure, with the arm grasping the sponge and continuing in a series of arcs up the right side of the body, is played against the angular folds of the drapery and the jutting thrust of the left arm. Modelled in rare and unusual colour which unites with the glancing light to set the figure in space, it is one of Degas' most vigorous treatments of the nude.

PLATE FIFTEEN

THE MANTE FAMILY (about 1889)

Collection Mrs. Huttleston Rogers, New York

Pastel on paper, $35\frac{3}{8}'' \times 19\frac{5}{8}''$

In this delightful picture of a family group in the ballet Degas has combined elements of portraiture with types drawn from his backstage experience. How often he must have seen the mothers of the little ballerinas fastening ribbons in their hair or tying bows on their shoulders! Here he has contrasted the child in her dancing costume with the slightly older sister in street clothes, a contrast which is subtly felt in the poses of the two girls, the one on the left stolid and waiting, the *danseuse* already stretching her toe and more fluid and graceful in the whole line of her figure.

This pastel is unusually sober in colour for Degas. Rather than his unusual mixture of bright and brilliant hues, this is a harmony of blacks and browns and russets, against which the light tones of the ballet costume stand forth. As usual the drawing is vivid and searching, the parallel strokes of pastel building the form and giving a unifying sense of texture to the whole picture. The Mantes were notably connected with the Opéra in Paris; the father a bassoonist in the orchestra and the three daughters at one time or another dancers in the ballet. The one in the practice costume is Suzanne, then about seven years of age. Her sister, Blanche, is in street clothes and was eight or nine at the time.

PLATE SIXTEEN

REPOSE (about 1893)

Collection Sam A. Lewisohn, New York

Pastel on paper, $19\frac{1}{4}'' \times 25\frac{1}{2}''$

Not all of Degas' later studies of women were in his favourite theme of the nude body in movement. At other times he cultivated the static, loving to catch a characteristic pose and develop it in several variations of colour and palpitating light. Here he renders a composition with great mastery, managing to suggest beneath the pattern of the drapery the almost sculptural force of the figure flung on the bed. He allows himself a greater depth of feeling than in many sketches taken from life where Degas records, rather than creates. The woman is more of an individual than usual; it is as though the ageing master who more and more concentrated on the taut and violently twisted bodies of his models, here sought a profound psychological mood.

Much of the picture's intensity springs from the electric colour with which it is carried out. Degas, first in the theatre and later in the loneliness of his studio, was one of the first painters to exploit the qualities of artificial light. While the Impressionists tried to catch the dazzle and atmospheric blue of out-of-door Nature, Degas concentrated on problems of interior light where he seems, particularly in his early period, to prolong the objective renderings of certain Dutch little masters. Later he loved the harsh glow, the vivid drama of electric light; and here so drenched and saturated is the colour that he obtains a strong, original harmony. As usual the rhythmic stroke of the pastel, the vigorous and sensitive outlines and broad modelling, convey far more than they actually state.

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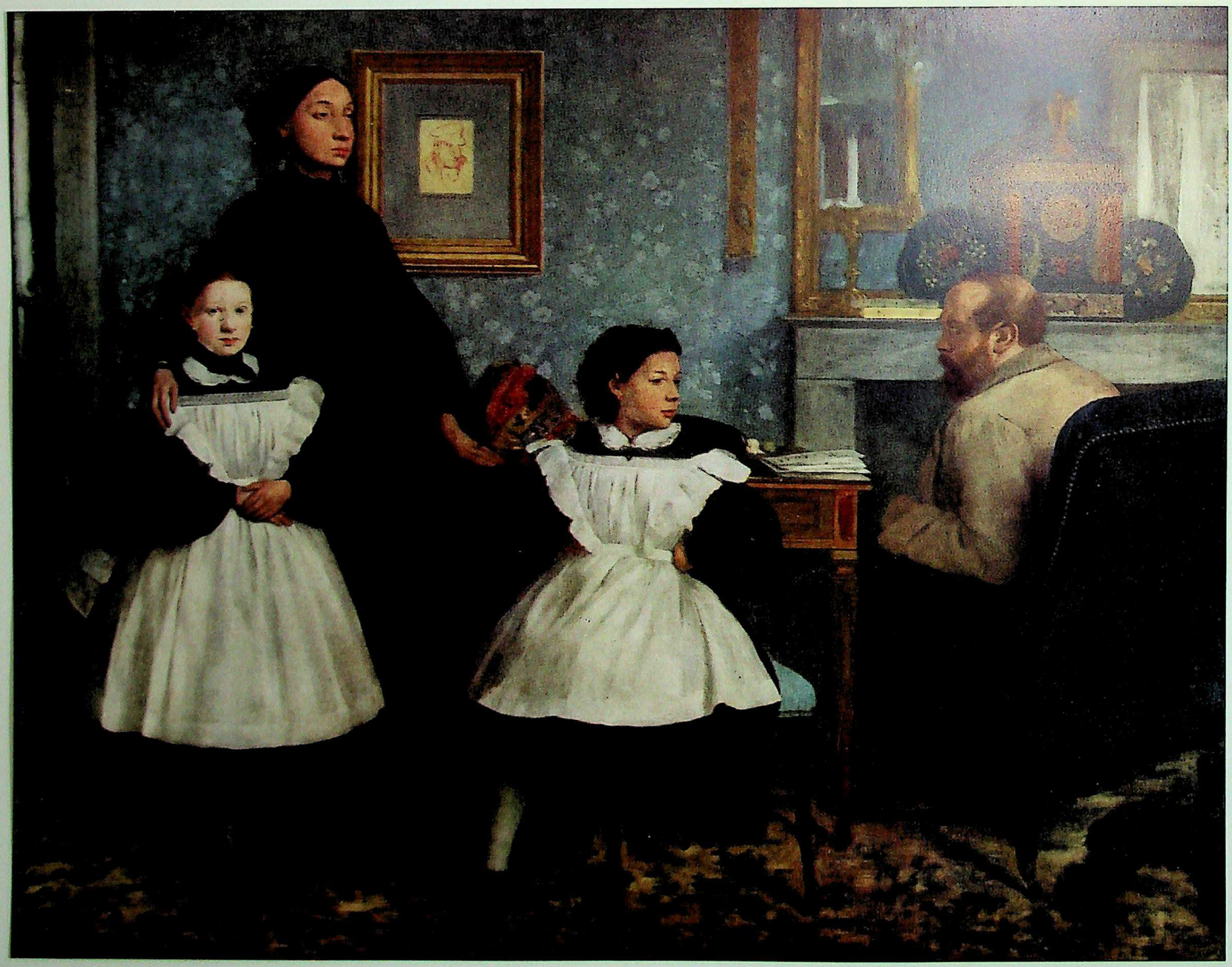

PLATE TWO

THE BELLELLI FAMILY (about 1860–1862)

The Louvre, Paris. Oil on canvas, $78\frac{3}{4}'' \times 99\frac{5}{8}''$

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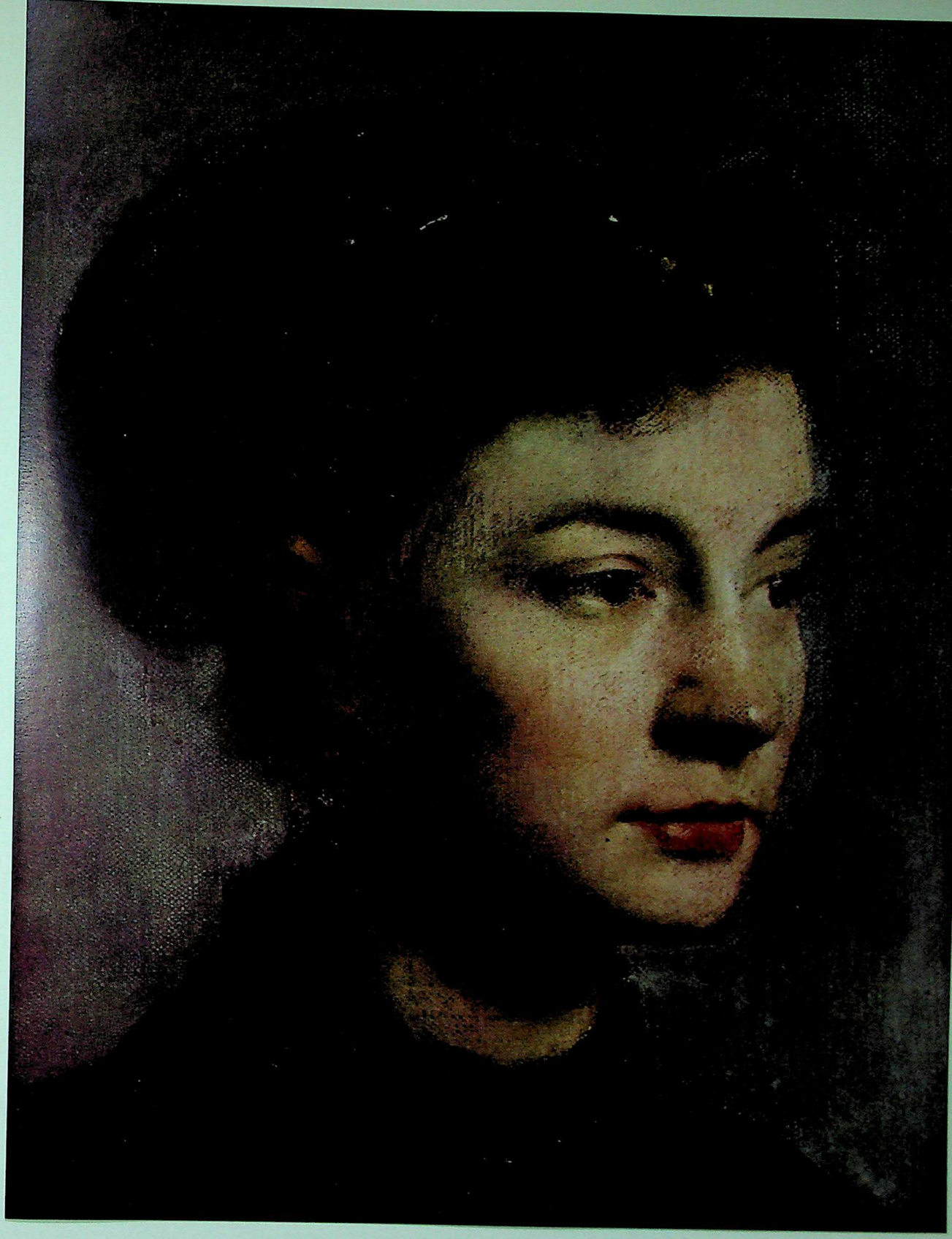

PLATE THREE
HEAD OF A YOUNG WOMAN (1867)
The Louvre, Paris. Oil on canvas, $10\frac{5}{8}'' \times 8\frac{5}{8}''$

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PLATE FOUR
DEGAS' FATHER LISTENING TO PAGANS
(about 1869–1872)
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
(John T. Spaulding Collection). Oil on canvas, $31\frac{1}{2}'' \times 24\frac{3}{4}''$

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PLATE FIVE

AT THE RACE-COURSE (1869–1872)

The Louvre, Paris. Essence on canvas, $18\frac{1}{8}'' \times 24''$

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PLATE SIX

THE COTTON MARKET, NEW ORLEANS

(1873)

Museum of Pau, France. Oil on canvas, $29\frac{1}{8}'' \times 36\frac{1}{4}''$

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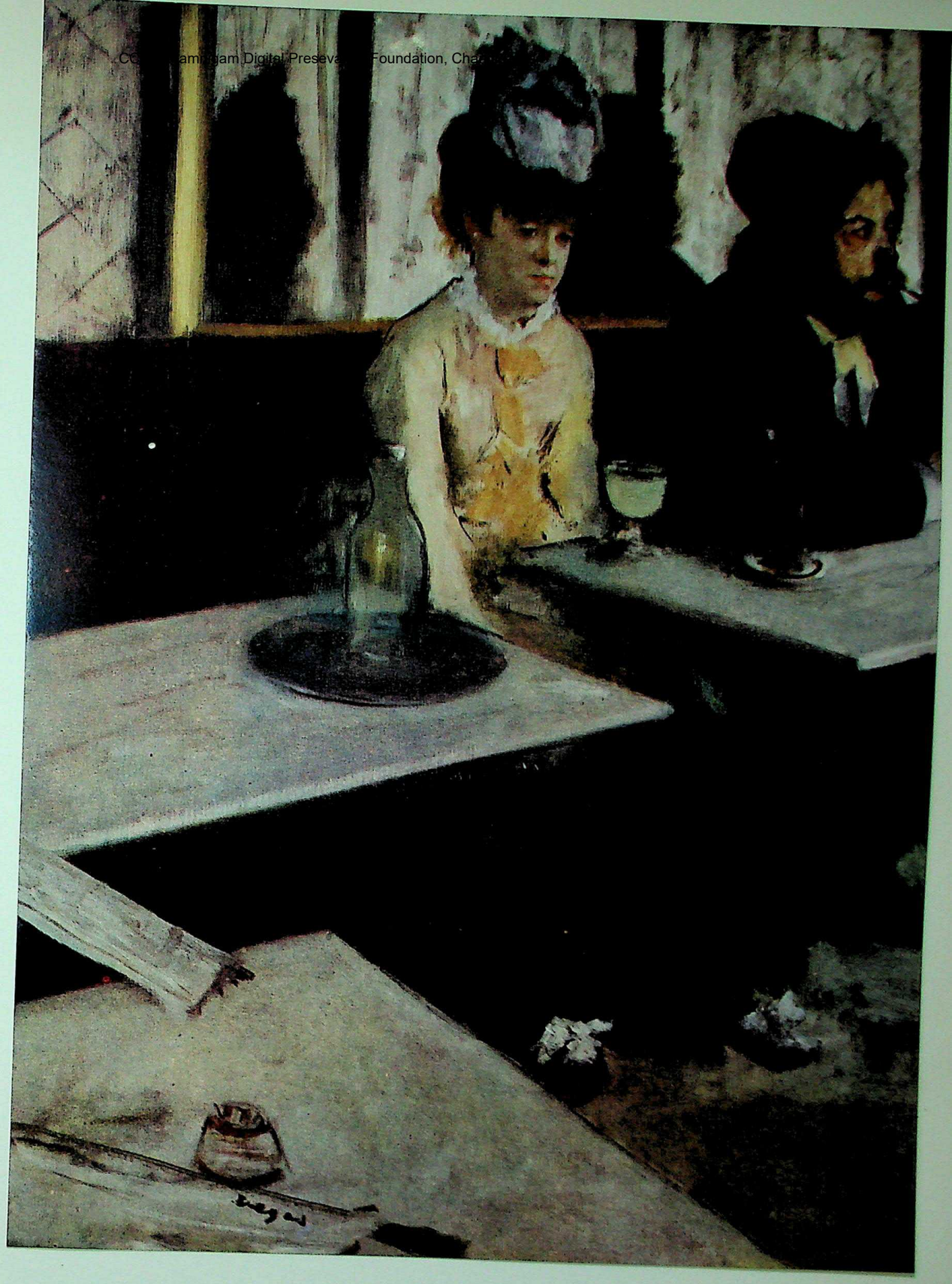

PLATE SEVEN
ABSINTHE (1876)
The Louvre, Paris. Oil on canvas, $36\frac{1}{4}'' \times 26\frac{3}{4}''$

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PLATE EIGHT
CAFÉ-CONCERT: AT LES AMBASSADEURS
(1876–1877)
Museum of Lyons, France
Pastel on monotype on paper, $14\frac{1}{2}'' \times 10\frac{5}{8}''$

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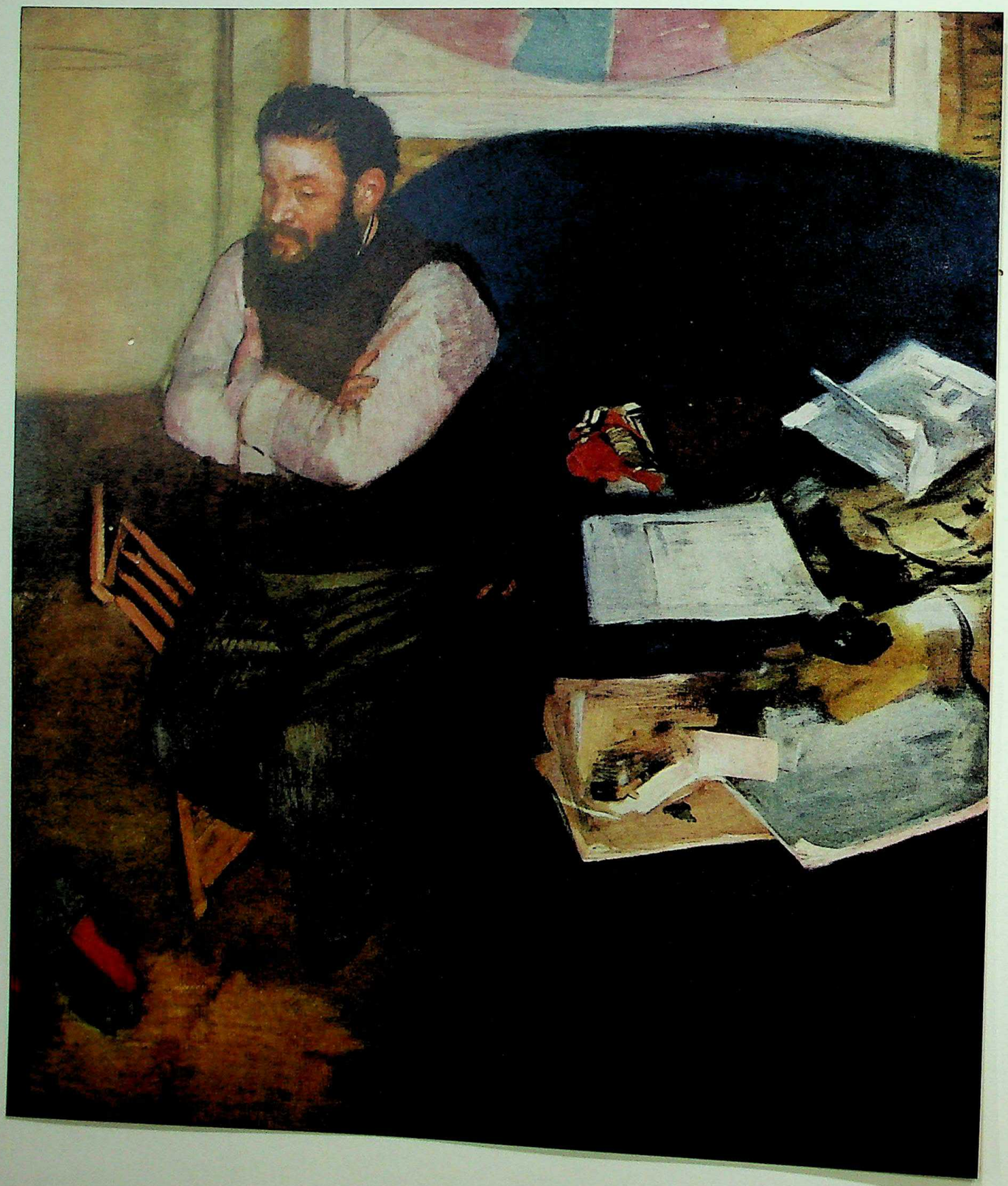

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PLATE NINE
DIEGO MARTELLI (1879)
National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh
Oil on canvas, $43\frac{1}{4}'' \times 39\frac{3}{8}''$

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PLATE TEN
THE DANCING CLASS (1880)
Denver Art Museum, Colorado
Pastel on paper, $24\frac{3}{4}'' \times 18\frac{7}{8}''$

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PLATE ELEVEN

TWO LAUNDRESSES (about 1884)

The Louvre, Paris. Oil on canvas, $29\frac{7}{8}'' \times 32\frac{1}{4}''$

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PLATE TWELVE

A BALLET SEEN FROM AN OPERA BOX (1885)
Philadelphia Museum of Art
(John G. Johnson Collection). Pastel on paper, $25\frac{1}{8}'' \times 19\frac{1}{4}''$

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PLATE THIRTEEN

THE MILLINERY SHOP (about 1885)
The Art Institute of Chicago
(Mr. and Mrs. L. L. Coburn Collection).
Oil on canvas, $38\frac{7}{8}'' \times 42\frac{7}{8}''$

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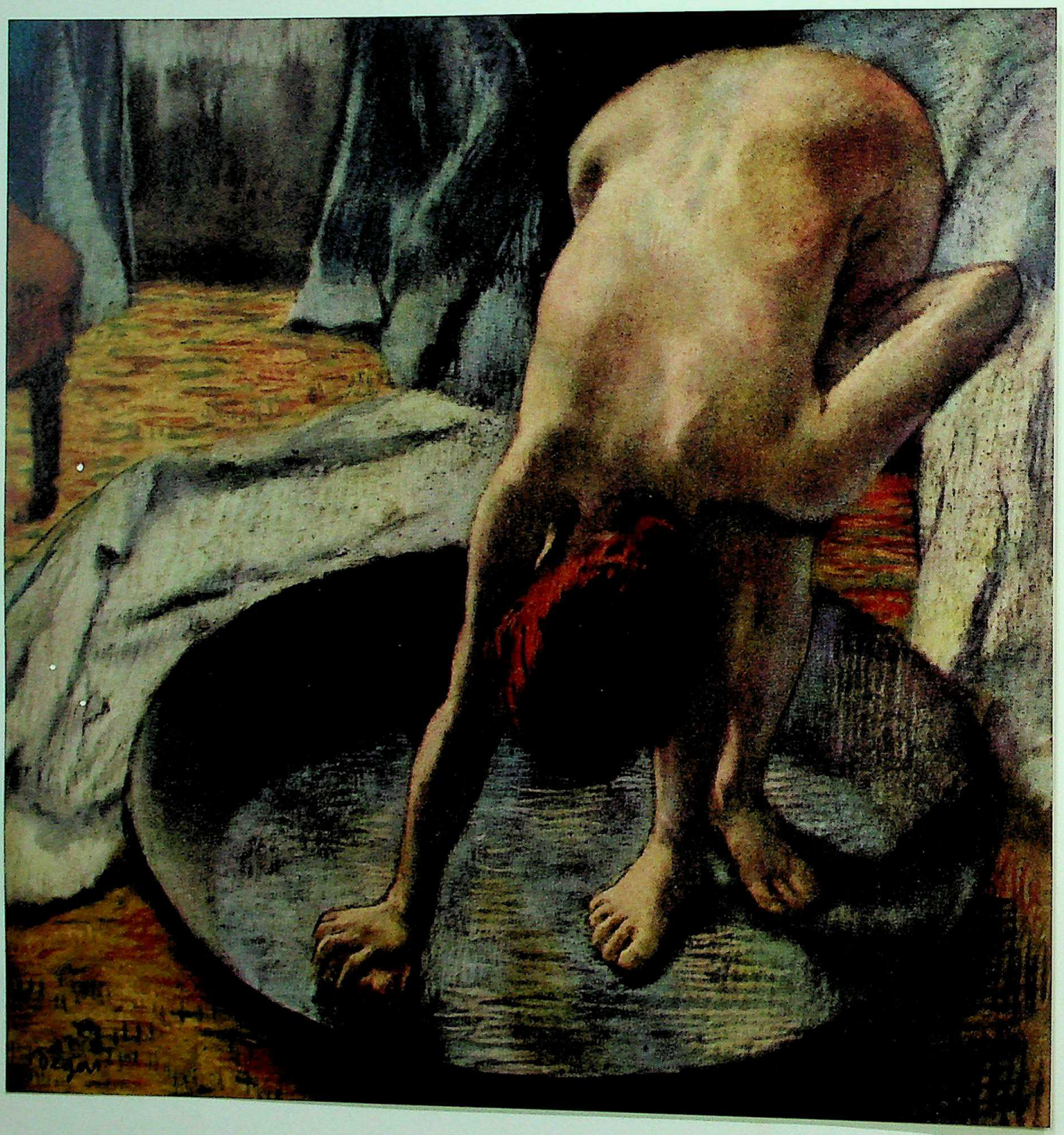

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PLATE FOURTEEN
THE TUB (1886)
The Hill-Stead Museum, Farmington, Connecticut
Pastel on paper, 27½″ × 27½″

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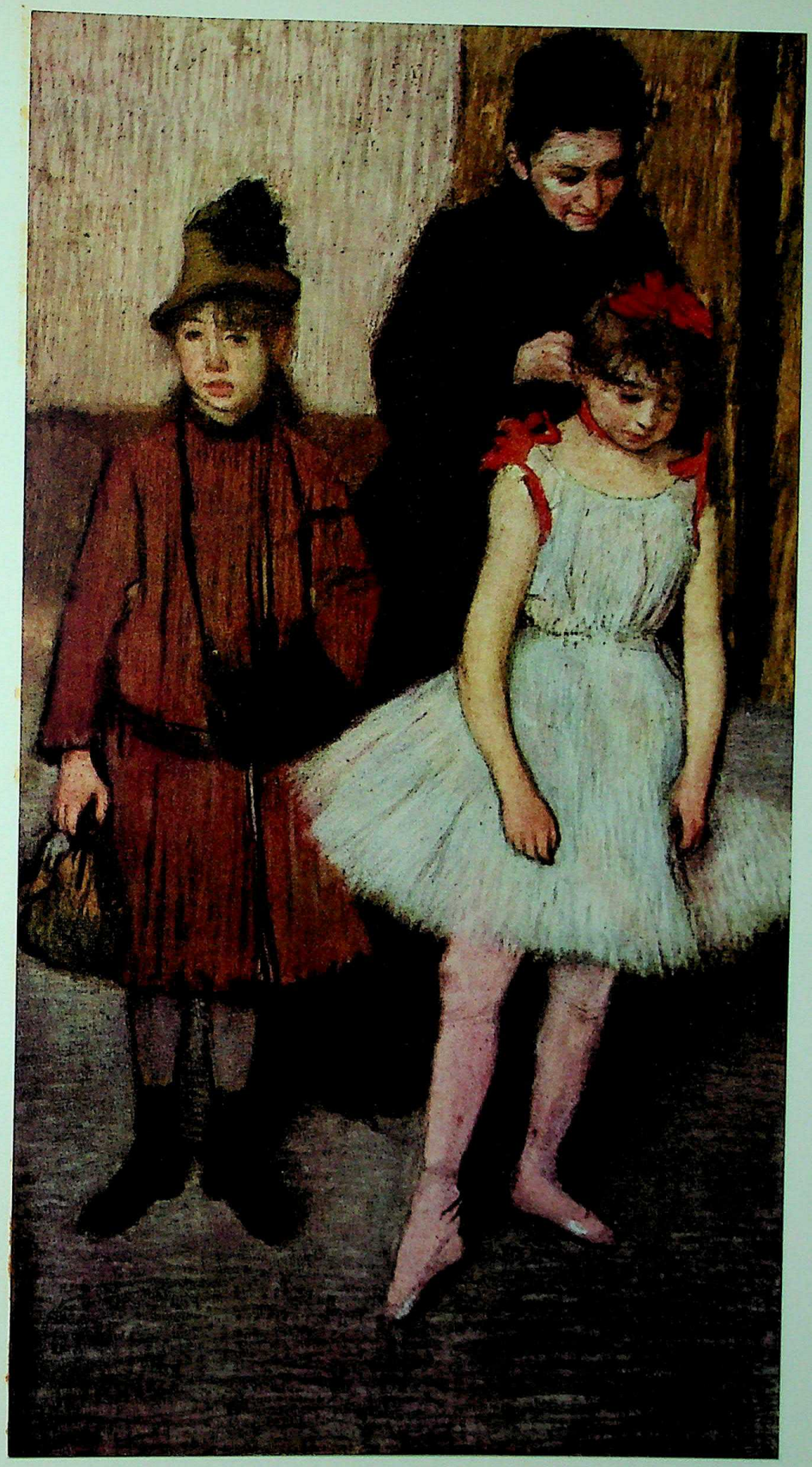

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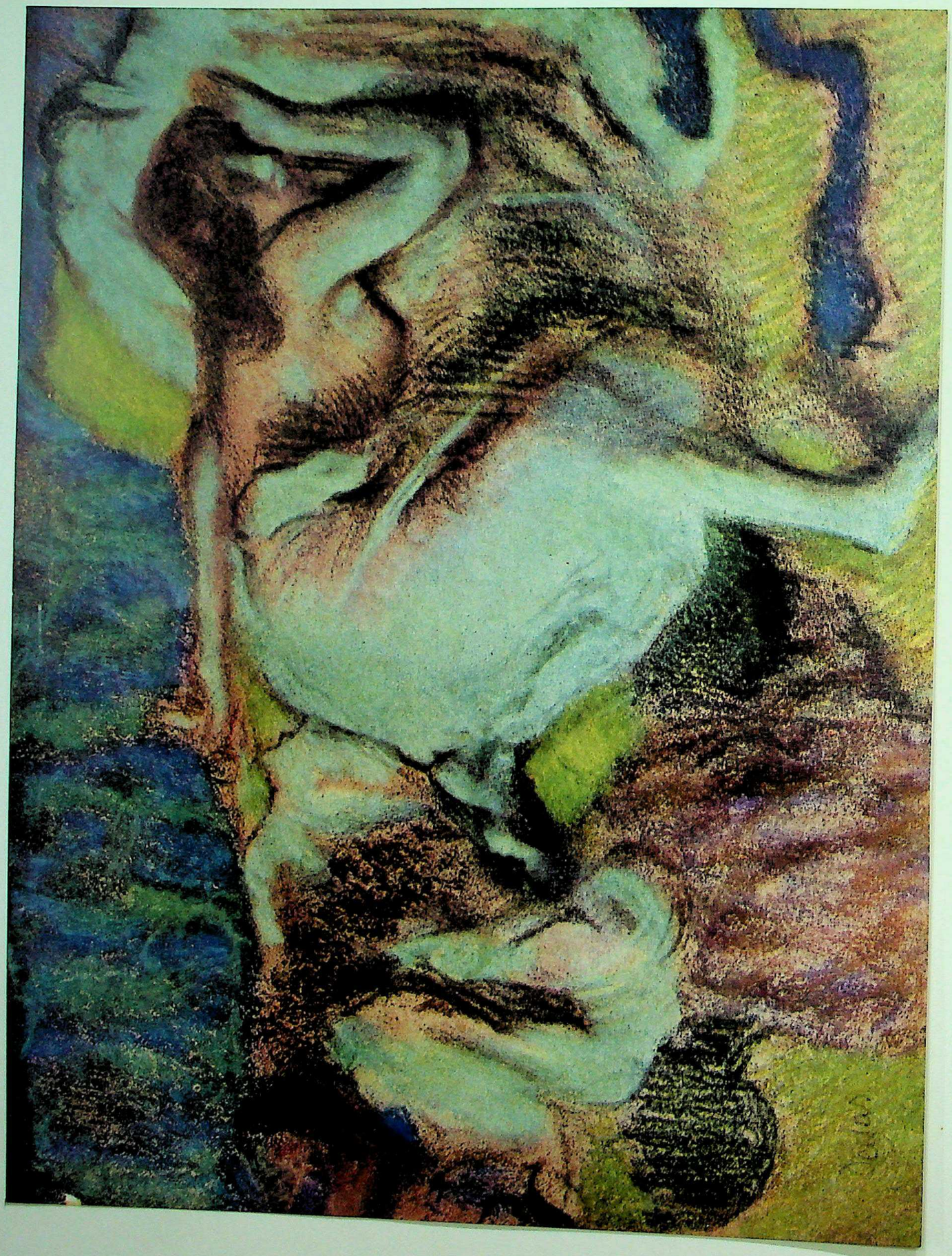

PLATE SIXTEEN
REPOSE (about 1893)
Collection Sam A. Lewisohn, New York
Pastel on paper, $19\frac{1}{4}'' \times 25\frac{1}{2}''$

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